Assem Salam,

The Architectural Profession in Lebanon



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I was asked to talk a bit about the architecture professional practice in Lebanon, I do not have many slides to show you, so my intervention will be a bit dry. However it is an interesting subject to talk about. How the architecture profession started in Lebanon? When did it appear on the scene and what are the present situation and the guidelines of this particular profession?

First of all I would like to go back to define and discuss a bit whom was responsible for the erection of all these buildings in Lebanon and how it became in the hand of some professionals. A lot of this has been covered by Robert Saliba and Arbid when they covered the 1920's 1940's. However, it is worth mentioning something about the appearance of the architects as such in the Middle East. Generally speaking, there is an ambiguity about the definition of an architect and an engineer. They are all labelled under the word "muhandess" and the specific terminology of the architect as a "me'mar" has appeared only in the 50's. I think the first one to talk about the "me'mar" was Refaat Chaderjy from Iraq but up till now it is not spread commonly yet. There is a common knowledge of "me'mariyin" defining architects but the domination of me'mar as such being specifically distinct from the muhandess is only recognized among few circles. However, when we come to the legal registration of the architect to be able to practice the profession in Lebanon as in most of the Arab countries, the registration is channelled through the engineering association.

I am not going to go into the situation of the architects in the Arab world because it is outside the scope of this seminar. However, I will talk a bit about the evolution of the architectural profession in Lebanon. We have to go back a bit to the days of the Ottoman, as Robert Saliba mentioned. The progress and urbanization that occurred in Lebanon under the Ottoman rule started beginning the 20th century. At that time, there was a timid introduction of technology through the reinforced concrete that was coming on the market and the boom in the building sector that happened through the specific socio-economic development of Lebanon sensed through Beirut.

One cannot distinguish between the specialization in the profession and the social development that takes place in the country itself. So with this timid introduction of reinforced concrete came with it an attempt by the academic institutions to start training professionals in that field. The AUB and University of Saint Joseph started in 1913 and 1916 courses in engineering. The First World War in 1914 stopped. After 1914-18 came the French mandate. With the French Beirut became prosperous politically and economically. That brought with it a lot of development in building.

There was a proliferation of building styles and lots of the traditional buildings showed in the slides in the morning were really built during the mandate period. Who built these buildings? In the references we process, a lot of these buildings were built by engineers, by people that were either trained in France or trained in America and

they were trained as engineers. These engineers were not responsible for the totality of the heritage, most of the heritage was built by builders, builders/contractors. The first attempt to establish some sort of association to regulate the design of buildings started in the early 30's. Recently, among the archives, we found Aphtimos who was one of the leading engineers of this period. We saw a lot of his works in Saliba's lecture- starting with L'Association Libano-Syrienne des Ingenieurs et Architects that was done in 1930. In these archives that were discovered recently, it is interesting to notice who can be member of this association. Les membres actifs (the active members) were first, "ingenieurs et architects diplomes, second, personnes ayant suivits un cycle complet d'etudes techniques superieur et ayant au moins quatres ans de pratiques." So there is the introduction of technicians with the condition that they have practiced for 4 years. But the most interesting part is the third category: "toute personne n'aitant pas dans les categories si-dessus," (they are neither qualified nor technicians,) "mais possedant une culture generale," (general culture,) "et appropriee." I do not know what they mean by "appropriee, et des connaisances techniques jugees suffisantes." So the door was open here to the absorption of people that are neither trained as architects or engineers nor they have any knowledge of technicality. That was done deliberately to absorb a large number of people that hand in these buildings and side them in a professional manner but are not professionals.

I am not mentioning this as a criticism. I think a lot of these builders was extremely qualified and knew exactly what they wanted to achieve. But it shows you that much of the buildings that were done in the period of construction in Lebanon in the 30's were not done by professional practitioners or people that were trained academically as professionals. This situation lasted till the end of the mandate, in 1943. After the end of the mandate, in the 1950's- the time of the independence- Lebanon gained a lot of importance political, socially and economically through the position it got due to its the political democratic system, and the entrepreneurship of the Lebanese themselves. During this period, there was an enormous building boom. Under the pressure of this boom, the government for the first time introduced an act regulating the professional practice of engineers. At that time again, the word architect was not mentioned. In fact there were very few architects operating as architects professing in Lebanon at that time. This act was promulgated in 1951 under the law regulating the practice of engineering in the country. Under the word engineer a lot of people came in. Architects are called engineers, civil engineers are called engineers, mechanical engineers are called engineers, and later on everybody even agriculture engineers became engineers. So, the body of engineers became inflated with a multi-disciplinary groups and the architects became diluted into this mass of professional technicians.

This lasted between 1951 and 1997- for almost 50years. During this period, the building sector in Lebanon was one of the most important sectors in the economy of the country. The special position that Lebanon gained as a result of the prosperity that took place in the 50's and 60's was axed mainly on real estate and buildings. As such, there were a lot of buildings that had to be handled by specialized people. The need to train architects as such became pronounced. That was one of the reasons why the AUB , in 1952, started the program of architectural engineering, it did not yet had the courage to specify it as the school of architecture. It was still being in the engineering faculty. The Universite Saint Joseph had started this a little bit earlier by having the ingenieur battisseur, which they discontinued later. At that time the only faculty in Lebanon that was dealing specifically with architecture as such was the ALBA. It is the Academie Libanaise Des Beaux-Arts, as they call it in the French system. Architecture was linked to the Beaux-Arts and not to the engineering. So that timid approach that started at the AUB allowed the architects to become slightly distinguished from the engineers. But according to the rule that existed, engineers as such were still allowed to practice and design buildings.

In the 50's, the number of architects, I did not think exceeded half a dozen. So with this evolution and orientation towards specialization, the number of architects or engineers interested in architecture became more pronounced and the numbers grew. This continued up to 1997. The number of architects increased exponentially between 1952 and 1997. We have about 5000 now in Lebanon and there has been about 7 universities that deal with specific teaching of architecture. It is in the early 60's that the AUB decided to have a special branch of architecture and change the name of the faculty into the Faculty of Engineering & Architecture and started giving degrees in the architecture profession as such.

This is a bit of a historical background that illustrates how things developed. Now we are setting guidelines that are worth mentioning that governs the practice of architecture in Lebanon. Even in the new law of 1997 that was promulgated about three years ago, the door is still open for the practice in the building design by engineers and architects. It is not limited only to architects. It was extremely difficult to change the law because of certain acquired rights by the profession of engineers in dealing with this aspect of the profession. An issue created a lot of discussion among the members of the Order of Engineers. Between 1951 and 1997 the order of Engineers, there was no identification of any architects' role.

They were part of the whole body. There was no branch or no association or no effective representation in the council membership that represented the architects. It is only in 1997 after a hard battle with the other professional members of the order that the specificity of the architect was given and they have now a branch of architects within the Order and there is one representative of the architecture profession in the body of the council. I am saying that this is a step forward in the profession, but really the conflict is still there. Non-architects are handling 60-65% of the buildings in Lebanon. Again, you probably saw a lot of the slides of buildings that were designed by engineers. George Arbid showed these slides from the period of the 50's and 60's and these buildings were not designed by architects. I am not saying this to discredit the qualifications of the engineers but this is a profession that has to be regulated. It is under this pressure that the Order of Engineers started to put some regulations over how you can do these things, and they took three measures to try to control the practice in architecture. One of them was a question of quota, which is a quantitative measure of the number of square meters per year an individual architect may design. It is a very elaborate and problematic constitutional system that tries to split the cake among everybody. It is still in existence up till now and it was extremely difficult to change it. The other procedure is the forced partnership. The law says, and this applies only to buildings, that one individual cannot design a building or be responsible for the permit. One person can build a bridge, one can build a power station, one can build anything one's want, and one does not need the signature of the engineer. When it comes to buildings, it has to be signed by the engineer. By this signature, the Order tried to control a bit this operation. They made an internal law, whereby all buildings above a certain area (and they started about 100 m2 of built-up area) should be based on an association between architects and engineers. This is one way in forcing multidisciplinary association of architects and engineers. When it came to about 2000 m2 and above then they introduced the association of other disciplines like mechanical and electrical. So again there was this question overall control and opening the door to participation of other disciplines into the design of buildings. The other attempt by the Order was the establishment, to raise the standards, of a technical office that will enforce a quality check on working drawings of the design.

Unfortunately, this question of technical control of quality of design did not work extremely well. I mean to set rules to submit the building permit and within 6 months you should submit the whole execution, pass it and get approved by the technical office of the Order. This gave an enormous control on the part of the Order to go to the details of the reinforced concrete, electricity, mechanical installation and architectural standards of the Order and I do not think it is being in any way implemented in the right direction. The other thing the Order tried to attempt is the question of apprenticeship. For the moment you can practice architecture immediately after you graduate. The moment you register yourself with the order you become a full-fledged professional architect. We thought that this is a bit too risky for fresh architects to handle a building of a certain size. We tried to introduce regulations regarding apprenticeship. Unfortunately we did not succeed.

To finish with this, I think the question is that we have about 5000 between the Order of Tripoli and the order of Beirut. Over 5000 architects working in Lebanon, which is an extremely high figure. This has to be controlled. Seven universities or seven academic institutions are producing architects. There are an enormous number of architects that are working and a lot of them are without jobs. The government tried two years ago to intervene by restricting the number of applications to study architecture. They made this regulation in the fields of Engineering, Architecture, Law, and Medicine. The government made this regulation and than changed under the pressure of the universities themselves. The universities did not want simply to reduce the number of applicants. You know, in Lebanon, Education is free. It is not controlled by the state and many universities are bellow standards. Objection was raised by some of the academic institutions that paralyzed the application of this rule.

I may have given you a bit of a gloomy situation about the profession in Lebanon. But my feeling is that there are very good architects, very good academic universities, and academic institutions that teach architecture. We probably should be more restrictive in the choice of who is going to study architecture and a bit of emphasis on the socio-cultural background of the people and the role of architect in society. That I think is a bit neglected in the architecture profession and in the architecture teaching.